

2-20-1989

Article and Interview Transcript with New Haven Advocate newspaper

Prexy Nesbitt
Columbia College Chicago

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Nesbitt, Prexy, "Article and Interview Transcript with New Haven Advocate newspaper" (1989). *Rozell 'Prexy' Nesbitt Writings and Speeches*. 41.
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20 QUESTIONS

By Melinda Tuhus

Prexy Nesbitt

Anti-apartheid writer, teacher, lecturer and consultant

Prexy Nesbitt came of age with both the civil-rights movement in the U.S. and the anti-colonial, anti-apartheid struggles in Southern Africa. His teachers included Martin Luther King and a veritable Who's Who in the African liberation movements. He headed up the first South Africa divestment campaign while on staff at the American Committee on Africa (ACO/A). The 45-year-old Chicago native now serves as a consultant to the government of Mozambique and was in New Haven recently as part of a speaking tour sponsored by the Mozambique Support Network.



Kathy Milani photo

Your family's church, Warren Avenue Congregational, was a hotbed of activism in the '60s. What mark did that leave on you?

It shaped me very much because the church was a pioneering church, one of the first integrated inner-city churches in Chicago, which is really the northern suburbs of Mississippi. It was the base for Martin Luther King's open housing drive: members were also very active in the anti-war movement. Many of the people who came out of that church are activists today. It was also where I met Eduardo Mondlane, the founder of Frelimo (the liberation movement that led the anti-colonial struggle against the Portuguese in Mozambique and is currently the ruling party there). He was pursuing his doctorate in anthropology at Northwestern University, and he married his wife, Janet, in our church.

How much time have you spent in Africa?

I've been 18 times. In 1965 I went from Antioch College to the University of Dar Es Salaam in Tanzania. I was the first Afro-American, and the first foreign student, at that university. Tanzania was alive...it was the quintessence of the '60s—liberation struggles and revolutionary change. Mondlane was there, and Amílcar Cabral (assassinated leader of the anti-Portuguese struggle in Guinea-Bissau), Agostinho Neto, the first president of Angola, Che Guevara, Ruth First and Joe Slovo [white anti-apartheid leaders from South Africa whose story was told in the film *A World Apart*]. She was assassinated a few years ago. And J.B. Marks, the leader of the 1948 gold miners' strike in South Africa. These were people who formed you. In their presence you watched history unfold.

You got in on the ground floor of the divestment campaign. How would you judge the success of that effort?

In 1977 and '78 I was in charge of the ACOA's Committee to Oppose Bank Loans to South Africa. The bank campaign represents one of the signal successes of the anti-apartheid movement in the U.S. The first truly significant withdrawals of money came from progressive unions in New York City in 1977. The latest figures indicate \$40 billion has been moved, either bank monies withdrawn or money divested.

You've been to South Africa in your travels. What was that like?

I was in South Africa illegally in 1983. I was tremendously impressed by the commitment coming out of the ANC [African National Congress] to building a multi-racial society. When it's all done, they will move toward creating an equi-

table, non-racial society much quicker than we will in the U.S., because the nature of the struggle inside South Africa has compelled people to have a tremendous clarity about who the enemy is. That clarity yet eludes us in the United States—and I mean that for black

'South Africans have moved through the three-fold process of unlearning racism, becoming anti-racist, and adopting non-racialism based on a firm understanding and appreciation of the various mosaics of the human race.'

people and white people. In South Africa they have moved through the three-fold process of unlearning racism, becoming anti-racist, and adopting non-racialism based on a firm understanding and appreciation of the various mosaics of the human race.

Most recently, you've been working for the government of Mozambique, which achieved independence in 1975 but has been fighting for years against Renamo, a guerrilla group supported by the South African government. How would you describe the situation?

It's an ignored story when you have a tragedy of the scale that's happening in Mozambique. A U.S. State Department report last year indicated a minimum of 100,000 people killed by these bandits. My own estimate is 300,000 to 500,000 people since 1980 who have died directly or indirectly due to the war. But these people are black, so who cares?

You mean there is an element of racism in the lack of coverage?

Absolutely. A lack of interest leads to a lack of reporting. In 1986, 440 people were killed in a massacre. Three months later I talked to a producer at 60 Minutes who said to me, 'We'd like to do a story but the death count isn't high enough.' He said if we had another spectacular massacre, to give him a call. Off and on we hear a lot in this country about the famines affecting black Africans. Why is this different?

What is happening in Mozambique is not the result of famine or flood or drought. It is the result of a program of war and destabilization waged by the South African government and its allies in the U.S.

Renamo has between 7,000 and 10,000 soldiers, the bulk of whom are kidnaped young boys who are systematically programmed to kill in the most horrific manner possible. We have trouble telling American audiences about it for two reasons: many people just can't deal with the horror of it, and also, it reinforces racist stereotypes people already have.

Of blacks killing blacks? Exactly. But it's easier to talk about when you link it to the groups and organizations in the U.S. that have joined with South Africa to support the bandits. I just delivered a research paper in Germany that listed 59 U.S. organizations and individuals that support Renamo (including representatives of religion, the media and the government).

There was a pact a few years ago in which Mozambique agreed to stop harboring members of the ANC if South Africa would stop supporting Renamo. What happened to that? That was the Nkomati Accord in 1984. Within a year we discovered that South Africa had systematically violated it. People as high up as deputy foreign ministers had gone into the camps of the bandits inside Mozambique, giving them instructions and arranging for arms shipments. This is why we get so annoyed when we read that what is going on is a civil war—that helps to disguise the real source of this kind of terror, and it comes from the No. 1 terrorist state.

Former President Reagan made his administration's position clear vis-à-vis Southern Africa, with his policy of "constructive engagement" in South Africa, his support for the UNITA rebels in Angola and his refusal to condemn Renamo. What are you expecting from President Bush?

We are very concerned with where the Bush administration is going in terms of Mozambique. He has said it's a civil war and he would like to see both sides negotiate. This is like a rapist asking the family of the daughter who has been raped to sit down with him. If the U.S. should decide to do in Mozambique what it is doing with Angola, Mozambique won't survive. Its leaders say the future of their country is somehow being determined here in the U.S. We need people to become much more informed about what is going on. Four million people in Mozambique out of 12 million live on the edge of starvation; over a million people are dislocated and living in neighboring countries; there are 400,000 orphans. Every Mozambican has a relative who has been killed by these bandits. Mozambique is a traumatized society.

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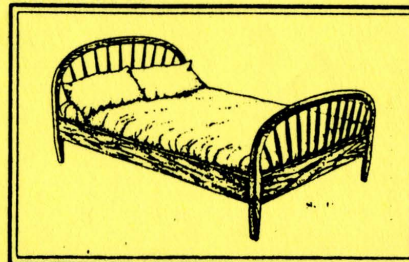
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Interview with Prexy Nesbitt, Consultant to the government of Mozambique

Smith. What early influences in your life caused you to take this particular direction in terms of working in the area of racial reform?

Nesbitt. I would say that the main influences that caused me to move in the direction of social change, including structural change in the United States were (a) the kind of values and (b) the kinds of commitments and orientation that I got from my family and their friends. I think in many respects I was much of the genre of "red diaper" babies. Only it was not just the influence of politically radical people but it was also the influence of religiously radical people and culturally radical people. I think a great influence was a strong immersion in the Black culture, exposure very early to the significance of, for example, the Marcus Garvey movement (I had uncles who were members of the Universal Negro Improvement Association); a very strong orientation towards and feeling about Africa, a very early exposure to the people and organizations in the Black community who had long been doing progressive social change work - Paul Robeson, W.E.B. DuBois, Malcolm X. I think also that my parents always lived a life of giving and service and commitment to change and improving peoples' lives. So I would say those are the main influences, with one addition. I suspect that, particularly in the 60s when I went to Antioch College, it very much reinforced these orientations and also grounded me in some initial exposure to systematic reflection and analysis for social change.

Smith. Why did you choose Antioch?

Nesbitt. Well, I had a choice. I had football scholarships to Yale and Oberlin and Michigan and money to go to those schools, too. But my father had spent time in Southern Ohio (Dayton and Xenia). He was there

during the war and Yellow Springs, Ohio was one of the few areas completely available to Black Americans. It was an open town. It was called the "oasis in the desert," the desert being the racism of southern Ohio. And my father always liked what went on at Antioch College in Yellow Springs. I went to visit it and visited the other places and there was no choice. I also like the orientation toward work and study.

Smith. When you were at Antioch, was that the beginning of the student movement across the country?

Nesbitt. Very, very much so. When I was at Antioch it would have been from 1962 to 67. I remember the first couple of weeks at Antioch, there were two things that happened. Antioch in the 1960s was a virtual seatbed of social change. In 1962 when I entered within a month of starting classes down in Yellow Springs, one of the things that happened was the Cuban Missile Crisis. And I remember very much both being amongst the generation of people who were freaked by it. But I also remember being in a group which went to Washington and protested Kennedy's imposing this embargo on Cuba. And I think we were not many protesting that.

Smith. Any faculty?

Nesbitt. There were a couple. At Antioch it was very unique because there were a number of faculty who were very far-thinking and clairvoyant, politically clairvoyant people. Ollie Loud, for example, who had been the Ohio Chairman of the "Wallace for President," the 1948 "Wallace for President" campaign. There were also people like various members of the drama department and the literature department. A man named Micky McCleary who had spent time in prison who was very much a progressive thinker who taught political science. Any number of

people. And they were all also a group of faculty very much committed to doing things, not just learning.

Smith. What were some of the other things you did at Antioch?

Nesbitt. Well, we had a chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality. So we protested the one institution in Yellow Springs that was still segregated. It was a barber shop, it became a very famous protest in the 65-66 period, no the 63-64 period, one that eventually mobilized the Ohio National Guard to come into Yellow Springs. Many of my classmates were part of the Mississippi summer of 1964. Some of the family of Schwerner and Goodman, for example. There must have been 50-60 students from Antioch's campus of 1800 who all went down to Mississippi. I was very much one of the people who was in that group who was supposed to go but I had a great struggle with my family about going and then also I got sick and couldn't make it. I did go late to Mississippi (after 1964) and spent two or three weeks working in Mississippi.

Smith. Was your family concerned about your safety?

Nesbitt. Safety, mostly. And also we didn't have much money and for me to take time out of school to go was also a big concern in terms of whether I could get money again to finish school.

Smith. At some point in your school career, you got involved in organizing against apartheid.

Nesbitt. In 1967, my senior year at Antioch, I had been the previous year and a half in Tanzania studying through the Antioch Education Abroad program; came back to Antioch and formed the Antioch Committee Concerned with Southern Africa. The culmination of that was in my senior year. We marched on the Trustees' meeting protesting and demanding that Antioch, protesting Antioch's investments in companies involved

with South Africa and demanding that Antioch divest. That would have been in June of '67. I think it's one of the earliest reported actions on a college campus - actions. We took over the Trustees' meeting. I remember chasing them, all through the rain, as they tried to go from what they thought was one hidden site to another to try to continue their meeting. But we had already scoped all that out. I was the leader of that action, so much so that ten years later when Antioch finally did divest, they invited me back to give the keynote commemorating that action.

Smith. Did you go back?

Nesbitt. Yes, I did.

Smith. What did you say?

Nesbitt. Definitely, one of the comments that I made was about the length of time (to divest). But I also talked about how I thought that even in '77 it would be the beginning of a rising crescendo of divestment. By that time, I was the field staff of the American Committee on Africa and was traveling the whole United States initiating other divestment activities. Little did I know that those early involvements would ultimately lead to some \$40 billion being moved in the United States which is the transfer of a lot of money for essentially moral and political reasons.

By 1977, Antioch finally did divest. It was interesting to me because by that time, also, I had made many, many contacts with leading trade unionists in the progressive and radical streams of trade unionism in New York City. Unions like District #65 of the Distributive Workers' Union, #1199 - the Drug and Hospital Workers' Union, the Fur and Leather Workers' Union, the Meatcutters' Union. These unions and their leadership were amongst the first men who then transferred union

bank accounts from banks that were involved with South Africa to South Africa free banks. And I think that was a great influence on me. It certainly led me later, which would have been in - I can't remember the exact dates - in essence giving another 3 to 4 years of my life to union organizing.

Smith. After you got out of school?

Nesbitt. After I got out of school, after I had been thrown out of three different graduate schools.

Smith. Tell me about your graduation from Antioch.

Nesbitt. I think you must be referring to the fact that when I graduated, the President gave me a special thanks that I was leaving. The President's name actually was James P. Dixon who was known as being a real reformer in education at that time. In fact, Dixon was a real wheeler-dealer. I think there were many ways in which there were superficial reform stuff; but there was also a lot of involvement that we always were very concerned about. He had a close relationship to the Peace Corps. And the Peace Corps in the 60s and later, of course, would be involved in CIA activity in Africa and elsewhere and also in stamping out dissent against the Vietnam War.

And Antioch always had these two faces. One was the seeming face of completely progressive activity and strong anti-racism; the other was the reality of being an institution geared at molding an elite. In fact when I graduated from Antioch, there were only six of us or seven in my graduating class who were Black.

Smith. How many started?

Nesbitt. There would have been only about nine who started. There were no American Indians; there was maybe one Puerto Rican brother. Antioch in 1967 was just beginning a program financed by the Rockefel-

ler Foundation to bring significantly disadvantaged youth to Antioch. And I remember being on a committee that worked very, very diligently to get that program started. And it rocked Antioch the next four or five years when for the first time you had serious numbers of inner-city Black, Latino, Indian and poor White youth come into these idyllic, shady groves of Yellow Springs, Ohio. But it was a very important program that Antioch was involved in commencing and it made real their commitment to anti-racism. But I think that many of these things led, also combined with other things, to Antioch jumping out into such levels of experiment with education. I was very involved with what was called the First Year Program. That was another effort, along with the development of satellite campuses that I think you now about - these things ultimately destroyed Antioch; that expansion with very little structure to back it up; certainly no financing finally led to very drastic blows against Antioch from which it's still trying to recover.

But I am grateful over-all, I would certainly say, for my Antioch education.

I think, one other thing and then I will shut up. The Francis Parker School in Chicago, though a private school, was a progressive stream private school. And I must say that the faculty that I had when I was there were all socialists of some sort or another, and somewhat open about it. I remember walking into Monthly Review Magazine's headquarters in New York. Upon people there learning that I had gone to Francis W. Parker, they really greeted me totally enthusiastically because they had been close associates of my 8th grade teacher at Francis Parker, Sarah Greenbaum, who had been one of the founders on Monthly Review Magazine, which is one of the longest, independent, radical reviews/magazines in the country, which this year

will celebrate its 50th anniversary as an independent socialist magazine.

Smith. What did you do after graduation?

Nesbitt. After graduation from Antioch, I started at Columbia University with a Columbia University Faculty Fellowship. It only lasted for a year because at the end of '68, I was, along with other White and Black students, who took over and occupied Columbia University protesting against its expansion, unsolicited expansion, into Harlem Black community and also protesting against its involvement with think tanks serving the U.S. occupation in the war in Vietnam.

Smith. What do you mean, expansion into Harlem?

Nesbitt. Columbia was going to build a gym for Columbia students, exclusively for Columbia students, which would have been predominantly White students, middle class White students, in the Harlem community. Just taking it over. And that was one of the reasons we protested, particularly Black students at Columbia. It led to what was a month-long occupation, sit-in. It was also one of the initial points of protesting Columbia's involvement with South Africa. But it never...it took years before Columbia would finally divest. That involvement in that action led me to basically losing my fellowship at Columbia. And about the same time I lost my fellowship, I lost my student status and was drafted. I fled the country and went back to Tanzania to work for the Mozambique Liberation Front as a school teacher. This would have been 1968-69.

Smith. How long were you there?

Nesbitt. About two years, at the end of which my mother was dying of cancer. I had to come back to the United States. Why I didn't get jailed or drafted when I returned, I don't understand to this day. When

I came back to the United States in 70-71, I got very involved in a little alternative high school on the West Side of Chicago called St. Mary's Center for learning, which was a citadel of a lot of good progressive education, very oriented toward Paulo Freire and that kind of thing, big adult education program at night. It ultimately died because the monies were cut by the Catholic Archdiocese, among other things. The City Colleges also cut off their monies for this very innovative and politicized student body. And then also, out of that St. Mary's Center for Learning High School, the day school, there were a number of my students who were all very close to the Black Panther Party, a lot of them in fact. It was a remarkable period. It was a period of struggle and of confrontation.

I was telling students of mine at the Art Institute who are saying to me that, because of this current period where the Art Institute and the rights of artists to do their work freed from censorship where the students are being daily confronted, many of my students were saying that they had headaches all the time. Well, I think we lived in a period of headaches, constant headaches. When you are involved in a struggle, you are involved in headaches.

Smith. What did you teach?

Nesbitt. I taught Black Studies on the high school level and, I insisted to the school but it never worked out, we were going to try to get a curriculum that would meet the needs of all of the students there. The school was about one-third Black, one-third Latino, and one-third Italian. What I was pushing for was for the school to teach all of those groups' histories and cultures Italian Studies, Black Studies, Latino Studies - and require everyone of the students to take all of those things. We never quite got to that point. We were certainly

moving in that direction when the school finally closed its doors.

Smith. What was the enrollment?

Nesbitt. I think it was about 3 or 4 hundred. We also had a very big adult education night-school with nearly one thousand students. It was an open campus on the city's near West Side near the Veteran's Hospital. And we had a great deal of struggle with dope and with dope taking over the school. I went back to that school after the 69-70 period in 1975-76. And actually I think I was the last commencement speaker for the last graduating class of the school before it permanently closed.

Smith. What is it now?

Nesbitt. Nothing. Even the facility was torn down. What's left of it now, which was the nun's residence, is now part of the Veteran's Administration Hospital. It sits there as a single building on the southside of Taylor just west of Damen.

Smith. I would like to go on but am going to stop you here. What are some of the things you worked for in the 60s that are now institutionalized? Are there things that you see that people now just take for granted?

Nesbitt. Well, I think that amongst them...Well, I think some are but I don't think nearly as many gains like that have been reaped as one would think. I think one would be the abilities of people to struggle together, at times. Although it's certainly not as...Oh, I'm not even sure that that's institutionalized.

Certainly one would be the right of people to vote and to vote freed from the machine or from the state preventing you from it. I'm talking about legal gains. I think certainly schools have been much more opened up than what they were earlier. But on the other hand, the

economic constraints against going to schools are greater now than what they were earlier. There was a period when I think there was a greater commitment to institutions providing monies for minority and Third World peoples to go. That was a gain for awhile. But I think, again, now cloaked under economic constraints, schools are making it more difficult to get in.

Social relations between different groups are, in some areas of the country, much more open and possible than earlier. I can remember a period when inter-racial dating - I can remember being stopped by a highway patrolman driving across Indiana from Chicago and being charged with miscegenation by a highway patrolman because of having a White woman who went to Antioch with me in the car with me. And at that time Indiana had on the books laws against inter-racial sex. So this highway patrolman pig pulled me over and was charging me, literally, with miscegenation. And we were brought before a justice of the peace. The justice of the peace didn't even know what the law was. He didn't know what the word even was when the policeman first presented us. By this time, I had called a lawyer and the lawyer was getting ready to come up from Dayton, Ohio to this little town in northern Indiana, over towards the Ohio border somewhere, when the judge decided that he just didn't know enough about it to fight it, so he dismissed the case.

I also can remember, in southern Ohio, I can remember us having Ku Klux Klan people, not only rallying and burning crosses on the homes of various liberal professors lawns and stuff - but I can remember Klans people shooting on week-ends at our dormitory rooms. And I remember a young child who got shot off a bike, a young black girl, 8 or 9, shot and killed off a bike where she was riding on the basket handlebars of a guy that was a student, a friend of mine, a White guy. And the Klan

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people shot her right off his bicycle.

Smith. Were there charges ever brought?

Nesbitt. Nope. But Antioch was so hated in southern Ohio, especially by the surrounding cities. They just hated us with a passion.

Smith. So you do not see changes that would give us hope that things are better?

Nesbitt. Well, I see those gains and improvements as either being eroded or being attacked. For example, I would certainly say that I helped in union organizing work even when I was at Antioch. I remember helping to organize as part of one of my co-op jobs at the New York NYU Hospital on 34th and 1st Avenue, the Institute for Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, and I was helping Local 1199. And in those years, the 60s, were very much people fighting for the right to unionize and for the gains that came from having certain protection of having collective bargaining in social security, health care and so forth. Well all that stuff is being rapidly eroded, although we gained it at one time to a certain part of working conditions. But with the last 8 to 10 years, we've seen steady erosion of those rights.

Smith. The Reagan Administration?

Nesbitt. The Reagan Administration and the post-Reagan Administration.

Smith. Can you think of some issues from the 60s that you were convinced were important which you now feel are not particularly important?

Nesbitt. I think one that was certainly important to me at one point would have been the battle over certain conservation issues that I was very early exposed to because of the exposure in Africa.

Smith. Environmental stuff?

Nesbitt. Environmental stuff: water issues, wildlife issues, preservation of wildlife. I don't think that those are now nearly as impor-

tant on the priority list of issues as what they would have been to me earlier.

The issue of infiltration of groups and surveillance of citizens, spying on citizens in the United States was of big importance in the late 60s and 70s. I think it is just assumed now. We have to function with it as a reality and I think we have no real vehicles for fighting it.

Smith. Can you think back to some major failure that makes you wince?

Nesbitt. Oh, since this is a confidential interview, one of the biggest would have been the failure of my generation of activists to achieve the goals of real equality between sexes in the struggle. I remember very much the term surfacing of "heavy." So and so was a "heavy." Heavies always were men. And there was very much a tendency of men dominating the movements and women did all the work. Or certainly men having various relations with different women. And I think that was even more pervasive in the Black community than in the White community, that machoism, the plethora of different ownership kinds of relationships. And I don't say that as any archangel. But I think it is one of the areas where we failed that I wince about.

Smith. Let me ask you what you think the major lessons were that came out of the 60s.

Nesbitt. When you ask me this question of the major lessons that came out of the 60s, that is something that leaps to my mind. Three things. Number one, the failure of various multiple-groups, diversified different groups who are all suffering from the same structural causes in the United States - I mean Asians, Blacks, Latinos, Indians, poor whites, working Whites - to come together and to see the commonalities of their struggle. That's one. That failure meant that the structures

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of oppression in this country could continue to dominate.

Number two was the failure to develop a new style of leadership in the 60s and the 70s which would supercede the sort of "great man" egoistic territorial type turf leadership that we see characterized many of the civil rights movements and were adopted by Native American movements and Mexican movements. So there is never a collective leadership style that was developed. It was always a great man or great woman who was at the pyramid. And it was a replication of the very types of leadership that came from the very enemy we were fighting against. And we therefore often duplicated structures of inequity and unfairness and domination without allowing for participation of people, the very kinds of things that happened structurally within the system in the United States.

And I think a third thing was, and related to this, was that there were never enough young people coming forward and letting youth come forward and grow and move forward. So that you get in the Black community, Black leadership now, this whole bunch of has-beens who sit up on top, supposedly spoken of as the representatives of the Black community when there are other many, many impressive young Black men and women leadership in their 30s and 40s.

Smith. Whose failure is it?

Nesbitt. I think it was our failure to develop a clear enough picture and strategies and principles that would assert collective leadership and the encouragement of young people to move forward. I think it was our failure.

Smith. You don't think it was a part of cooptation?

Nesbitt. Well, I think often cooptation was another part of this, certainly in the 60s, the 70s. The whole Model Cities thing; Johnson's

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Great Society crap and all that; and then the physical elimination of so many young Black and Latino leaders. Physical. Things like the Cointelpro Program, where the FBI just shot people down. And the FBI memo, "we must prevent the emergence of Black leadership that could unify and electrify the Black masses." And was an exact quote. So you had physically numbers of people who were just killed.

Smith. Would Job corps be a part of that physical removal?

Nesbitt. Job Corps helped to remove the base of many of those who could have been a source of more leaders like that and the source of a radical constituency and a radical mass movement. I think we don't know how close we were in the late 60s, early 70s to the development of a truly transforming politics in the United States. I think that this structure knows that we were close to a really - it was on a global level. 1968 had the potential of being a moment of structurally transcending, structurally ~~transcending~~ ^{transforming} and changing these mechanisms of power in the United States. It was a revolutionary moment really. And I think we never realized fully - some people did - realize fully how incredibly close we were. But again and again our own divisions and failures to understand what the enemy was - who the enemy was. We got caught in race again and again and again as one of the most divisive obstacles that divided up the progressive movements in this country, one from another. And we are still paying that price.